

Book Review: The Practice of Public Diplomacy – Confronting Challenges Abroad

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Abstract

The Practice of Public Diplomacy-Confronting Challenges Abroad, a compilation of essays by public diplomacy students at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, presents several key themes concern about the field of public diplomacy. Edited by Amb. William Rugh, the book analyzes public diplomacy initiatives conducted throughout the world.

Keywords

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Introduction

This new book of essays by public diplomacy students at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, edited by Amb. William Rugh, emphasizes the vital but often neglected “field” program of U.S. public diplomacy and raises a number of questions about important concerns. Through interviews of U.S. Foreign Service officers abroad and in Washington, D.C., the 14 authors sympathetically portray the daily achievements, struggles, frustrations, and highlights of the highly dedicated corps of American and indigenous national employees in U.S. embassies around the world.

The book largely focuses on U.S. public diplomacy in key countries in different regions and then explores the growing role of “new media” in U.S. public diplomacy. Several authors explore key questions about the future of U.S. public diplomacy, and Amb. Rugh concludes with an insightful chapter on his field experiences and best practices.

The book is a useful addition to anyone’s library of current writings on public diplomacy, especially for adding case studies of “the real world” to the more theoretical scholarly literature. The researchers analyze the broad historical, contemporary, political, and social context, assay U.S. public diplomacy challenges; briefly document the use of public diplomacy “tools” and special approaches; reach a few, usually sound, conclusions and submit brief recommendations for future U.S. public diplomacy activities.

Sections on selected cases in Europe and Southwest Asia, Africa, and Asia are followed by sections on the new media and on new thinking, including a chapter on whether public diplomacy should be privatized, and a chapter on whether Peace Corps volunteers practice public diplomacy.

Among the many lessons of public diplomacy recorded by the analyses, three four five stand out: the broad decline in trust of the United States over the past decade; the danger of inflating expectations that can’t be fulfilled; the growing importance of young people in public life; the meteoric rise in the use by U.S. public diplomacy practitioners of digital communication, from SMS to social networking tools to the mobile phone; and the broadening of public diplomacy audiences compared with the past, and, even perhaps, beyond meaningful definition.

Initial reference to history and to the evolution of public opinion in featured countries is an excellent way to start any public diplomacy analysis. Several essays indicate how diverse publics, not just in the Middle East, expected so much from the

United States as a result of President Obama's Cairo Speech, yet how frustrated audiences were at the failure of the United States to live up to what turned out to be extraordinary expectations. The President set out to re-engage with the region and Islamic audiences, to rectify George W. Bush policies, to "re-set" U.S. relationships, and foster a longer view toward future reform and revitalization after years of political and economic stagnation. It is fair to argue that the United States could never have delivered the kind of dramatic change imagined by President Obama's audiences. We are also prompted to ask if the President and his team and U.S. public diplomacy practitioners might have formulated a far more modest initial approach. Hindsight is a great instructor; those involved with the speech undoubtedly felt they were putting our relations back on firm footing!

Several chapters dealing with Serbia, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan vividly portray the decline in relations with the United States and heighten our awareness of the widening gap between the strategic vision of the United States and varied national audiences. We are reminded, once again, that "all foreign policy is local." The chapters interestingly depict how U.S. public diplomacy accounts for, and seeks to bridge the differences. More needs to be said than can be encompassed in the confines of these brief chapters.

In particular, the discussion of public diplomacy in Afghanistan and Pakistan merits additional consideration and research. The United States faces two of the most severe policy challenges in contemporary times in this region. Increasingly, we are losing the struggle for the hearts and minds of publics in the two nations.

Just to use the phrase "hearts and minds" is to remind us of the counter-insurgency efforts in Vietnam and to invite historical comparison with the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) in Vietnam. For about a decade from the mid-60s, until the early 1970s, one large program brought together military psy-ops; State Department public affairs; some USAID-related development support; USIA public affairs; and informational, cultural, and educational exchange assets. The foci were not unlike the multiple functions served by several different current programs in Afghanistan: to build indigenous political communication and counter-insurgency capacity; to convince the indigenous public and also international media that the war was worth fighting; our intentions were worthy; progress was occurring. A large advisory presence in the capital and regional provincial representatives worked with indigenous civil leadership, police, and military on the public communication elements of counter-insurgency and nation building.

In Afghanistan, the United States has invested heavily in major communication and governance capacity building, in mass communication efforts, non-traditional activities (e.g. TV adventure series to help build the image of the national police, etc.), as well as some traditional exchange activities. Broadcasting has amplified messages to audiences in the two countries and sought to use new platforms to reach broader, younger audiences. The results are belied by the continuing drop to unprecedented lows in public estimation of the United States and U.S. policies. Ongoing assessment would help the American and other publics understand whether and how our overall communication efforts are helping Afghanistan stand on its own. The acid tests are only two + years away.

Many of the authors comment on the huge and growing cohort of young people, under 30, in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa who were very prepared to hope the most from a young, charismatic president, perhaps too imbued by the power of his public rhetoric. A nation-by-nation analysis of youth attitudes on a global basis would be a worthwhile undertaking, both to compare with prior periods when demographic youth bulges affected politics and policies and to serve as a future baseline. It would be worthwhile to follow-up the analysis in the several chapters to see the pattern of expectations as the current generation matures and politics evolve.

Essays on Kenya and Sierra Leone tell of more variegated relationships. Opinion in Kenya, as in many countries in Africa, relates a different story from that of Europe or the Middle East and Southwest Asia in the past decade. With such a family connection to Obama, the Kenyan public remains enthralled, but will local politics interfere? The essay notes the questioning within the U.S. embassy about the necessity of its Muslim outreach initiative to a group comprising only 10 percent of the population. How influential is this demographic? The author wisely comments that it is difficult to shape messages for Islamic audiences in Africa who are so diverse. The essay on Sierra Leone fills in one part of the picture of great diversity in Africa, which most Americans miss. The U.S. public diplomacy practitioners in Sierra Leone must contend with larger-than-life perceptions of American society and U.S. policies.

Analysis of public opinion and public diplomacy as practiced in South Korea and Japan reveal even more complex relationships that have evolved over the past half-century. The differences center on trade; economic well-being; security concerns; and the identity of younger, upwardly-mobile, middle-class citizenry. Public diplomacy responses involve reliance on sophisticated informational services using all forms of available communication in an already saturated and competitive information/communication environment.

Virtually all the essays refer to how much the new digital communication approaches have been integrated into field operations and U.S. broadcasting. The mobile phone – even more than the internet – is becoming a mechanism for communication. There is a certain "gee whiz" quality in descriptions of the new formats. The book shows amply how widely the State Department and our field posts are using the new platforms of communication.

Although the digital formats add reach, scope, and speed to U.S. public diplomacy, it is very important to assess their

effectiveness. Brief descriptions in the essays can't give a definitive answer. This is another area that warrants much more thorough research and consideration. For example, how effective can U.S. outreach be to massively larger audiences around the globe? Questions of audience definition, the efficacy of U.S. public diplomacy, particularly aimed at youth and the cumulative impact or results of social networking platforms, need long-term analysis.

In that regard, it was heartening to see one counter-trend comparison in the analysis of public diplomacy before the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) became Russia. The magazine *Amerika* comes in for high praise because of its impact and the sizable audiences who pored over its contents and kept back issues. Similar comments about the lasting nature of some other print materials such as thematic brochures accompanying the special exchange exhibitions from the United States or the lasting remembrance of the American guides and the exhibits themselves. Perhaps these examples speak to different times, but they might stand out even more among today's ephemera. The digital era might ironically make actual products even more treasured artifacts! After all, good rag-content paper might last longer than a CD or online record. Ever try to find a player for your five-inch floppy disc? Or lose something on the Cloud? On the other hand, the new digital media might serve the purpose of building ongoing, sustained relationships very well, complementing in-person communication, building institutional links that matter, and promoting intense loyalties based on shared interests.

The author of the chapter questioning if Peace Corps volunteers do public diplomacy agrees with volunteers who believe they do, but must remain completely independent of policy affiliations for the sake of credibility and trusting relations. By and large, other chapters assume that public diplomacy is communication with international audiences, practiced or sponsored by U.S. foreign affairs agencies. Purists go even further to argue that only trained professionals can be considered public diplomacy practitioners. However Peace Corps volunteers understand they are not totally private, and those who see themselves as public diplomacy practitioners clearly value the role they play and the benefits they and their hosts derive from cooperation. This broader definition is not merely metaphoric: younger people, not necessarily inculcated in the profession through USG experience, define public diplomacy more broadly, with emphasis on the "public" in public diplomacy. Professionals should welcome this point of view, because it speaks of a heightened sense of global awareness and a commitment to constructive discourse and ongoing relationships.

Finally, one essay raises a major question of whether public diplomacy should be privatized. This is reflected by numerous studies in the past decade that recommend the creation of, respectively, a Corporation for Public Diplomacy, or a Foundation for International Understanding, or a USA-World Trust. These were not actually proposals for the total privatization of public diplomacy functions, but to varying degrees the establishment of a publicly funded organization that could work with and independent of the USG to promote better understanding of the U.S. abroad. The proposals also involve to some extent an advisory relation with the USG, even an implicit opportunity to help Americans better understand the rest of the world – the so-called "second mandate" attempted by the Carter Administration. The essay cites a number of arguments for and against additional privatization and casts doubt on the need or likely value of proceeding. The current budgetary and political climate seem to cast further doubt on such a move unless significant Congressional leadership believe funds can be saved and our interests better served. This is by no means clear. Already the State and Defense Departments rely on non-governmental organizations, private contractors, and grantees extensively. It is highly unlikely that the State Department would let any of its core public affairs and related informational activities go private, since they so closely connect to daily policy. Thus any privatization would occur in the realm of cultural, civic, and educational exchange; the arts; and humanities. In essence, to reframe the question of the essay: should the Educational and Cultural Exchange Bureau of the Department of State be privatized? I personally believe this does not serve national interests or the interests of involved non-governmental institutions. Some non-governmental adjunct might be helpful as an adviser and intermediary, able to provide more independent judgment, experiment more rapidly and aggressively with new exchange and cultural approaches, and raise private funds for worthwhile transnational endeavors. To some extent the authors of the various proposals are tilting at the limitations of the State Department, leading one to ask if it wouldn't be wise to see if the State Department can loosen its constraints on innovation, fund-raising, and experimentation. One of the benefits for USIA was that it wasn't so constrained as an independent agency, straddling the policy sphere and the non-governmental field.

The Practice of Public Diplomacy – Confronting Challenges Abroad is a serious effort to identify trends and issues that should concern American leadership and public alike. The various essays raise some important questions that merit ongoing consideration.

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